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College of Physicians and Surgeons

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Bellows, Henry W. History

Pamphlet

ADDRESS

BEFORE THE

“College of Physicians and Surgeons,”

AT THEIR

ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT,

March 14th, 1867.

BY

HENRY W. BELLows,

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES SANITARY COMMISSION

Published by Request of the Faculty of the College.

NEW YORK:
JOHN F. TROW & CO., PRINTERS,
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ADDRESS.

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN :

I FEEL myself much honored in being permitted to address, on this distinguished occasion, the College of Physicians and Surgeons in the City of New York. It is a privilege as well as a duty, for the learned professions whenever opportunity offers to interchange expressions of sympathy and good-fellowship in the presence of the public ; to testify to the esteem in which they hold each other, and to unite more closely in resisting the flood of suspicion or depreciation, which in the very nature of things ever threatens the more recondite studies and occult interests of society.

Around the bed of the sick or dying man, stand three indispensable officials—the physician to save his life, or alleviate the sufferings that must carry him to his grave ; the lawyer to enable him to express and make sure of the execution of that last will and testament by which he provides for his family, pays his just debts, or makes society in some of its important institutions, the heir of his fortune ; and the clergyman, who supports his sinking heart, purges his conscience, strengthens and clarifies his faith, commends to him the promises and consolations of God's Word, or gives voice to his penitence, his aspirations and his hopes of forgiveness and acceptance in the last day. And these three professions, thus meeting and culminating at the acme of human extremity, and equally important in their bearings on the safety of life, property

and spirit, are *learned* professions, requiring a special and eruditte training for their proper exercise—a training that cannot be fully understood by those who do not pursue them, and which is always in danger of being undervalued by society at large.

For it is not with the learned professions—using that phrase in its now venerable significance—as it is with the other vocations which by universal experience are conceded to involve a technical knowledge and skill wholly beyond the reach of any but their life-long apprentices. The products of the useful arts, the workmanship of the trades, nay, to a certain extent even the fruits of the studio, are things which appeal to the senses and the common judgment of men; their utility, in some sense, is obvious; their relative merit, measurable. Nobody, unless driven by distress, undertakes to be his own carpenter or plumber; his own watch-maker or engine-builder, his own optician, or practical chemist, or makes his own logarithms and rules of navigation. And those amateurs who hang up their own paintings or erect their own sculptures, or even build their own houses, commonly discover sooner by that process than any other, that both native genius and an exclusive devotion to the Fine Arts, are essential even to a tolerable success. People will not go to sea in ships built by any but professional ship-builders, nor buy at any price textures or fabrics that come from any but experts at the business.

But it is not so with the learned professions. These do not find a natural, experienced and competent jury to try their merits, in the public at large. The lawyer draws his papers, not to satisfy the public, but to satisfy the Court and his brother lawyers. The theologian knows that the people at large are no fit judges of the value of patristic literature, or exegetical criticism, or comparison of Uncial MSS., or of the laws that govern

the tradition of distant events; much less of the subtle value of ecclesiastical institutions and sacred symbols. The physician cannot fully explain to unprofessional persons the grounds of his hopes and fears, or the reasons of his treatment; far less the nature and bearing of his chemical, physiological and remoter studies upon his diagnosis or his therapeutics. He knows very well that he is continually guided by considerations and the knowledge of laws and facts wholly hidden from unprofessional eyes, and even perhaps the very reverse of what is popularly believed or is apparent to the senses. And all the professions, in their own studies and in their intercourse each with its own sons, use a vocabulary, scholastic, technical, popularly unintelligible and commonly enough supposed to be pedantic and affected—designed more to cover up ignorance, excite awe, or play off professional airs, than for any better purpose. “Why,” is the popular cry of our own day, “why don’t the lawyers write their legal papers out in plain, ordinary English; why don’t the Doctors make their prescriptions in the vernacular, and why don’t they call the organs and muscles and functions of the body by the titles that everybody else uses? Why do the theologians and ministers continue to use the musty phrases of the Schoolmen, or even the antiquated language of the Apostles,—or to maintain the traditions of the elders, and keep up the pretension that a minister is any thing more than a man talking about Religion with other men?” Now we do not hear this kind of superficial talk about engineering, or mining, or architecture, or music, or any of the useful or ornamental arts. People know that they are not competent judges of the *methods* used there, while they are pretty competent judges of the results. They know a good pail, without the least ability to make one; or a good razor, or a good wagon. And nobody expects to depreciate the trades or vocations that devote

their lives to learning these arts. But in our day, most laymen think themselves competent theologians,—often much better indeed than the professional ones, fair lawyers, and, specially, good doctors! How often have I heard it said, “The man who is not his own Doctor, by forty years of age, don’t deserve to live any longer!” And certainly in regard to the two other professions, the legal and the clerical, the feeling is on the increase, that Society has paid too much respect to their assumptions and technical learning; that a great deal of pretension has been covered up under their forms and ceremonies, and that good ordinary sense is quite adequate to judge of what is legal and right in the law, and what is true and important in theology. Probably in our country, for a time, this feeling will increase. It has doubtless much apology for itself in the necessity which will continue to exist in a progressive world, inhabited by a slowly advancing people, of every now and then pulling up the moorings and finding a new anchorage. It would never answer to allow the professions to escape wholly the criticism of common sense, or the spirit of the age; and they may have had, or probably have had, at certain times, an overweening importance, of which they took advantage to go to sleep. But, founded as they are in the interest of a continuous humanity—not based on the experience of a single generation—bringing ~~v~~ n the past, and handing it over with the present to the future, they are permanent and profoundly important interests of Society, and must maintain a criticism of what is called common sense, as well as submit to one; must shape the present out of the past, as well as be modified in shape; must stand for deeper things, less intelligible and less appreciable things, than those which engage the senses, the thoughts, or the experience of the present; and in the times when scholastic learning, or recondite studies, or science in its least practical forms, or philosophy in its

more subtle speculations, are undervalued and overlooked, or perhaps sneered at and set aside,—must stand by their culture; assert the dignity and importance of their pursuits, and join hands with the inner circle of those professional men who guard the sacred altar of learning from the popular storms that would extinguish its flame, and the winds that would mix its fragrant ashes with the common dust of the world.

I freely confess that in our day both the legal and the clerical professions seem to me to a certain extent responsible for the decline of their own dignity. They have both of them let down the upper bars of their enclosures, and made it very easy for low steps and short statures to enter them. Many of my own profession, in especial, are aiding to degrade it by shortening or popularizing the studies and the preparation essential to make scholars and theologians. It is a short-sighted policy, whatever necessity may seem to excuse it; and so is that other concession to popular ignorance, which, by making our Judges elective, takes from the Bar the inducement to study upwards to the Bench, and enables audacity, glibness and tact to supplant learning in the courts. We shall pay dear for this shallow demagoguism. We are paying dear now, when, with a Congress full of lawyers, we find so little competent learning and wisdom, prudently, and with a due regard to past experience, to guide our legislation, and are obliged to notice the subjection of the whole country to merely popular sweeps and caprices of opinion—as if all the landmarks were disappearing, and the past had no instruction and no value.

The medical profession, I am glad to acknowledge, is, in my humble judgment, the rising profession of the day. It is in a greener and more flourishing condition than either of the others; draws into its ranks more of the genius and intellectual power of the up-springing generation; is more

favored by the spirit of the age, which is marked by a preference for physical and practical science, and has less to contend with from the radical and democratic temper of the times. The scientific philosophy and inquiry of our age, which threatens Theology so seriously, favors Medicine in the same ratio. That very materialism which alarms the clergy, gives a new importance to the subjects and the methods of the physicians. While physical philosophy, striving to shut man up within the visible universe, and, with its scientific positivism, ignoring all ontology, and reasoning little to final causes, produces a terrible feeling in the clerical profession of the decay of spiritual faith, and the temporary paralysis of those nobler instincts on which Religion builds its holy structure, physics and medicine—leaving metaphysics and Divinity to make what they can out of their own dismay and their clouded weather—rejoice in the harvest which invites their sharp and shining sickles—find matter gaining most that mind has lost, the physical rising as the metaphysical subsides, and their own pursuits, investigations and inquiries enlarged by just as much as their opposites have shrunk. It is not too much to say that so much real metaphysics, and so much genuine spirituality, were never applied to medicine as in our own day. Never so much as in our own day, when no distinction is possible to any but specialists, was so much general culture, and wide and many-sided thought and study applied to the science of medicine. For specialists rise to their eminence like mountains, by the breadth of their bases; and there is no rich and fine fruit to be expected from any branch of medicine which does not grow out of a well-nourished trunk, rooted in the richest and most cultured soil of universal thought and wide-minded and open-eyed observation.

While the political, philosophical and commercial aspects of the age have damped the ardor of gifted young

men for law and theology, they have increased the zeal for all the physical sciences and arts. Engineering, mining and medicine, have lately drained our colleges of their best talent. This then is your great day, ye men of healing, and well have you improved it! It is propitious to all the learned professions, when any one of them is prosperous and honored, for in the end their fortunes are inseparable, and the victories and attainments of each will inure to the general advancement of learning and truth on which all depend. It is not without reason and necessity, that physics and medicine have the *pas* in our day. Speculations and assumptions, prejudices and prescriptions—the wind-falls, not the ripe fruits of metaphysical and theological studies—had no doubt gone on unchecked long enough. What distinguishes the age is the return to facts. And of course the most visible and palpable facts will have the first attention. But already the realm of fact is found to be considerably wider than the realm of the senses. Physics itself is not identical with what can be seen, or measured, or weighed. The imponderables are doing the work of the world; electricity, magnetism, chemistry, and physiology are discovering that the dynamic forces are not only mysterious, but, if not strictly spiritual, so near it, that nobody can tell the precise difference. It is the mission of medicine and physics to do away the absurd idea, that Matter and Mind are natural opposites and enemies; to demonstrate that the Maker of the universe—the author of nature and man—dwells unprofanely in the material as well as in the immaterial spheres; and that metaphysical science is inseparable from physical, or faith from knowledge, or God from man.

In a new country, the medical profession represents, practically, the whole interest of science, both theoretical and applied. A large part of all our naturalists, physi-

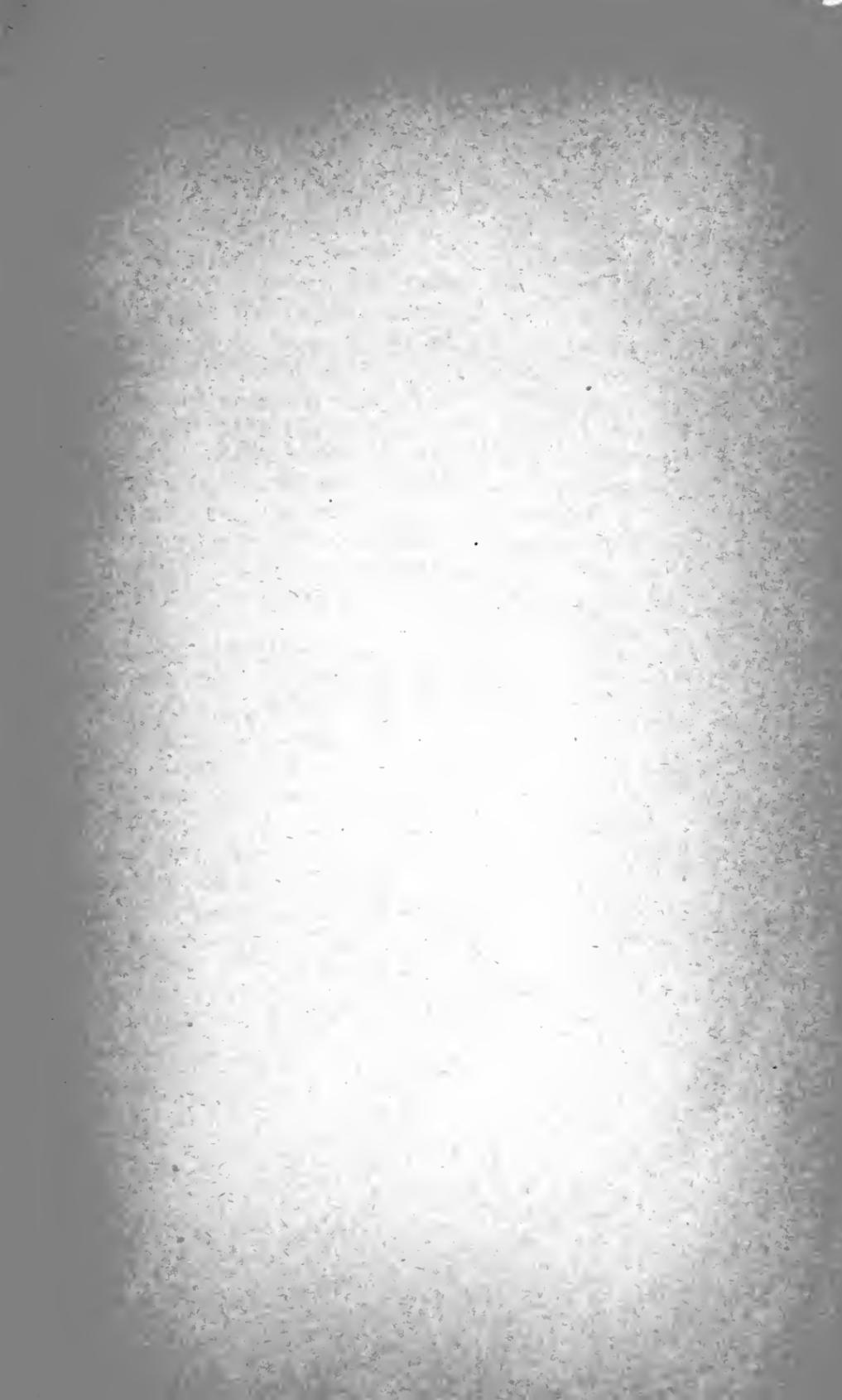
cists, geologists, and chemists, have been educated in our Medical Colleges; and in the newer parts of the country, if science is to find any representatives, it must be in its practising physicians. Now if there be anything which is needed to balance the intense activity of the American mind, tending everywhere to hasty and dangerous conclusions, it is scientific habits of thought and exact knowledge. There is a universal aptitude for thought, and a universal habit of expression in this country, but as universal a distaste for patient investigation, careful consideration and cautious conclusions. We lack a drill and discipline of mind, proportioned to its tremendous freedom, volume and force. In other countries the masses do not feel themselves entitled to opinions; much less to off-hand judgments upon the most important subjects; and consequently their credulity, rashness and shallowness do not get any public expression. But here, one man's opinion, is, in his own judgment, as good as another's, and no question is so hidden, difficult and profound, that he is not likely to give an opinion upon it, or lacking his own, to listen to any body's else opinion, and accept it according to its plausibility. The country is flooded with trashy and idle notions, taking on philosophical names, which owe their contagious spread to the fact that the widest interest in truth and the most active-minded curiosity exists in America, and is the prey of its own unscientific education, and of the pretenders, enthusiasts and fanatics, that live by pandering to it, or are themselves spawned in its marshes of rank fertility. Now, it is only medical men, who have much power to correct this perilous tendency, by their influence over popular education, their acquaintance with the sources of credulity, and the causes of mental epidemics, and their own rooted habits of cautious and precise investigation, and slow and measured inference.

Let the people be taught by medical men the unreliableness of their own senses out of the immediate sphere in which they are wont to use them ; let them understand the tricks of their own nerves, and all the delusions short of insanity which the imagination plays on unscientific humanity ; let them know that the juggler who tells them he is going to deceive them and does so—and the quack, intellectual, moral or medical, who tells them he is incapable of deceiving them, and then proceeds to do it, work by the same legerdemain, or rather sleight-of-mind, and that their methods are both founded on well-understood arts of thimble-rigging either the attention of the mind or of the senses ;—and, just as far as they will labor and strive to disseminate these facts, the reality and force of which none but medical men fully appreciate and understand—may we hope to free our country from the bad reputation, and the evil effects, of the grossest medical superstitions and the most ruinous mental and moral epidemics.

It would be ungrateful to me to close this address without a distinct expression of the gratitude due from the country to the medical profession for its great and glorious services through the war. The clerical and the medical professions went shoulder to shoulder through that great struggle, having perhaps even a more direct call to earnest work or bold expression, than the representatives of the Bar. The whole medical force of the country, it may be justly said, threw itself without reserve into the field ; and if army surgeons deserved any reproach, it came either on account of those who had been too long in the service in time of peace not to have lost the real temper of the profession, or from those half-fledged medical volunteers whom the exigencies of the case threw upon the camps and hospitals. As a rule, I can testify, after as extensive opportunities of general acquaintance with the

facts as most men, to the zeal, faithfulness, humanity and patriotism of the medical profession, throughout the war ; and I suspect the country is only very imperfectly acquainted with the hardships and the sacrifices of the army Surgeons, and the claims to gratitude which as a class they possess. But after all, the chief reward which the medical profession will continue to derive from their noble and devoted labors during the war, is that priceless impulse and opportunity, which so vast a war gave the science, the observation, and the practical skill of the medical profession. Never was a whole profession, for so long a time, under such quickening circumstances, at so costly or so instructive a school ! It will take a half century to realize all the fruits of its experience or to expend the force of the impulse it has thus received.

And now forgive me, in closing, for seizing this occasion to express to the medical profession the pride and joy I have personally felt in being most intimately associated for six years past with distinguished representatives of their calling—passing far the largest portion of my leisure in their society, and finding myself sometimes half in doubt to which profession I belonged, the medical or the clerical. I should have been a dull scholar indeed not to have learned something from such men ; and I say with all sincerity, that from my medical associates I have received new conceptions of human culture, new respect for manly honor and self-sacrifice, and new happiness in precious and undying friendships.







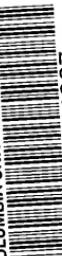
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